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ABSTRACT

Middle Tennessee State University recently developed a satellite-linked, interactive distance learning system with six rural K-12 schools. Faculty were then invited to make a single presentation over this system. The social work department, recognizing both the opportunities and the limitations presented by this new system, elected to be one of the presenters. However, instead of simply broadcasting one presentation, faculty proposed that a comprehensive program be developed for high school students, using the distance learning system as one component. The comprehensive program included: (1) a satellite broadcast to teachers at the six schools to discuss student needs; (2) follow-up contacts by phone and in person with key personnel at the schools; (3) provision of six videotapes dealing with drugs, alcohol, and violence to help prepare the students for the broadcasts; (4) administration of student questionnaires to determine problems and needs; (5) visits to the schools by senior social work students to examine student behavior; and (6) three satellite-linked, interactive, television broadcasts entitled "Anger Management: How To Prevent Violence in Our Schools I, II, and III." This paper reviews and evaluates the results of this effort. (MES)

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Satellite Outreach Program to Rural K-12 Schools

ED 436 122

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Abstract
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ABSTRACT:

Middle Tennessee State University recently developed a satellite-linked, interactive, distance learning system with six rural K-12 schools. Faculty were then invited to make a single presentation over this system. The Social Work Department, recognizing both the opportunities and the limitations presented by this new system, elected to be one of the presenters. However, instead of simply broadcasting one presentation, we proposed that a comprehensive program be developed using the distance learning system as one component. The comprehensive program included four broadcasts, contacts by phone and in person with key personnel at the schools and with the students, administration of questionnaires with the students, and the provision of six videotapes to help prepare the students for the broadcasts. The results of this effort are reviewed and evaluated.

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Introduction:

Middle Tennessee State University, with the assistance of a USDA grant, recently developed a satellite-linked, interactive, distance learning system with six rural K-12 schools in Middle Tennessee. Faculty were then invited to make a single presentation over this system. The Social Work Department, recognizing both the opportunities and the limitations presented by this new system, elected to be one of the presenters. However, instead of simply broadcasting one presentation, we proposed that a comprehensive program be developed using the distance learning system as one component.

Our outreach effort to these six rural schools was planned to include the following:

1. A satellite broadcast, on October 29, 1998, to the teachers at the six schools to discuss what their student needs were and how we might best meet those needs.

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2. Follow up contacts by phone and in person with key leaders at the six rural schools to refine how we might be of assistance.
3. Provision of six videotapes that we have developed dealing with drugs, alcohol, and violence for the schools to be used in the classes prior to our satellite broadcasts with the students.
4. Administering to the students at each of the schools a questionnaire that would help determine their problems and needs.
5. Having our senior social work students, many of whom went to these or similar rural schools, visit the six schools and interact with the students in a program designed to help them examine their behavior.

- All of the above leading to three satellite-linked, interactive, television broadcasts to the six schools. These were entitled: ***Anger Management: How to Prevent Violence in Our Schools I, II, & III.*** They were broadcast on three successive Thursday afternoons in February, 1999.

We have envisioned that this is part of a long range and comprehensive effort to reach out to these six schools by the faculty and students of the Social Work Department. The problems we encountered, how we were able to overcome some of the problems and not others, and what recommendations we would make to anyone attempting a similar outreach to rural schools will be discussed. The results of this first phase of the program will be presented.

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Discussion:

This type of distance education, which combines a variety of methods of instruction, including broadcasts, need assessment, the distribution of videotapes and meetings between high school and college students at several locations, creates wonderful opportunities and presents significant challenges. One of the most important things we learned and the key concern that anyone needs to anticipate in this effort is that it will take a lot more time and energy to coordinate these types of activities than you can possibly anticipate. Even schools that want to participate in such an endeavor will tend to present obstacles to any such effort. Schools, for good cause, tend to be very turf protecting systems. Also, schools tend to be fairly rigid organizationally. For example, when dealing with six different school systems, we ran into the problem of trying to find a time for our broadcasts that would fit all six schools. They were not about to change their school hours to accommodate our one-hour time slot. Any one-hour slot inevitably was acceptable to some and not other schools. We resolved this by expanding the broadcast to 1.5 hours. The first and last half-hour were repeats and the middle half-hour was the same for all schools. Thus, a school could tune in at 1:00pm and stop at 2:00pm or they could tune in at 1:30 and stop at 2:30. This worked for everyone, however, as you can imagine, it substantially increased the costs, time, and energy for all of us at the university.

Also, communication can become very tangled, to say the least. When both organizations, e.g., MTSU and the six schools, do not have a full-time person responsible for ensuring that information flows correctly, then Murphy's Law takes effect---if something can go wrong, it will go wrong! We made it clear that we were going to have three student broadcasts that built on one another. However, the schools changed student groups on us in mid-stream and the type of student being served changed from ones that needed educational information to those that needed treatment and were inappropriate for participation in a broadcast situation. Although you cannot avoid these types of complications, you do need to anticipate them and be ready to adjust your effort accordingly.

A brief but very scary moment occurred in one broadcast where students at one school, that was watching the performance of students at another school, made disparaging remarks about the other students. We

imagined the future news headline: "MTSU Professors Start Violent School Wars." Fortunately, the offended students handled it very maturely and the broadcast continued without complications. Student participation at both college and high school levels was very positive. Our MTSU students found the visits they made to the high schools to be very educational as they learned how to work effectively with both students and the school environment. However, that does not mean that this was problem free. Some schools and teachers welcomed our MTSU students into their high schools with open arms while others made them feel as though they were unwelcome intruders. Therefore, it is important that the college student be both prepared for this type of mixed reaction beforehand and have a time to talk about it afterwards.

At the time of this writing, we have completed one group meeting between MTSU and high school students and we are preparing for the other visits. The first meeting went very well and proved to be an important component of this distance learning project. This took place in a regularly scheduled high school class; which was visited by, approximately twenty-five of our social work majors and two project faculty. One of us was responsible for videotaping the process; the other facilitated it. The group meeting started with an "icebreaker" activity involving group cooperation and intergroup competition. This led to a discussion, initiated by the college students, of social activities among adolescents. The resulting interaction between high school and MTSU students and the ability of the high school students to share their perspectives with the group were impressive. Both student groups reported that they benefited from the process. The high school students learned something about recreational activities from each other and from the college students. Our social work majors learned a good deal about group processes. Additionally, the videotape of this meeting was invaluable in the preparation of materials for the first February broadcast. Edited segments were used to illustrate the value of group discussion in a process of identifying and understanding different perspectives. This material also provided examples of constructive uses of leisure time by adolescents. In our broadcasts, we made a concerted effort to get students involved. We attempted this in a variety of ways. First, since we videotaped the students during our visits, they knew that they would be seeing themselves on television during the broadcast---their "15 minutes" of fame, so to speak. At the start of the broadcast we also tried to get them enthused by having them not just "sign-in" but do so vigorously---contesting with one another. At each of the remote sites we had one or more of our MTSU students sitting in to encourage participation. We let students know that they could participate by asking questions and being on-camera or by simply passing a note to our student who would present their question. At our first broadcast we did a role-play with our MTSU students and as this seemed to work quite well, we arranged for the students at the remote sites, with the assistance of our MTSU students, to do their own role-plays on-camera. All of this helped to create a learning environment that was participatory and engaging for the high school students and, in general, they reported back, on confidential evaluation forms processed by the satellite program manager, that they thoroughly enjoyed the program. However, this was not always the case. During one broadcast, in an attempt to get the students more involved, we role-played with them via satellite. What occurred is that one of us angrily attacked one of the students, noting both before and after the attack, that it was just a role-play, that we were not ***really*** angry with anyone. However, the anger was so vivid that it erased all of the other parts of the message and the students became offended. Fortunately, our student at the remote site was able to effectively handle this problem. And, eventually, the students were able to see that when a person expresses anger, we often get so fixated on the emotions that are aroused that we fail to understand what is really going on.

Another concern that had to be repeatedly dealt with was confidentiality. We told the students that they should not share personal information about themselves over television, that they should talk about what "others" are doing. However, this was not always followed and should be repeated at the start of every broadcast. Also, each school that participated needed to deal with confidentiality issues as well.

At our third student broadcast we changed the format. We told the students at each of the schools to spend 15 minutes discussing among themselves what problems they wanted answers to and we had one of our

college students at each of the sites to facilitate this brief discussion. At the end of the discussion the schools called in their concerns and we improvised role-plays to deal with each concern.

Assuming that this is a new endeavor on your part as it was for us, you should be alerted to the fact that technology can be challenging and sometimes less than reliable. We needed to have practice sessions to learn both how to utilize the technology as well as how to best develop and present material over this medium. For example, if you ask remote sites to check in with you and then wait for them to do so, you have a lot of dead time that undermines what you are attempting to achieve. Therefore, it is important that you keep presenting material while waiting for them to check-in. Also, you need to be prepared for the unexpected. We were presenting material when all of a sudden a picture of an infant with undistended testicles appeared on the monitor. A glitch of some technical type occurred and someone else's nursing course started to get transmitted instead of our program. As this was a new system and we were among the first to utilize it, the potential for problems was extremely high. However, that potential is ever present and needs to be planned. How do you plan for the unplanned? You first try to think of all the things that can go wrong and have a response for them. For example, what if the remote site fails to receive the transmission? (You then send them a taped copy, an explanation, and an apology.)

If you have the time before starting your broadcasts, it would be a very good use of your time to tape a show without the audience, pretending that they are out there listening, and then viewing the tape. You will most likely learn a great deal by so doing. For example, you may find that what you are doing and saying is slow and isn't capturing the attention of your audience. This is especially likely given the short attention spans of most video audiences. Or, you may discover that the technical crew is not varying the shots of you or not providing enough close-up shots so that you need to provide more instructions to them as to what you would like them to do. If you can't do this ahead of time, then after each broadcast you should review what you did by viewing a tape of the broadcast.

The content of the program was designed to be experiential and spontaneous. This is one of the strengths of this type of programming. However, it also is a challenge, as you have to be prepared to fill the time effectively. You may need to have taped material or other backup plans ready should the need arise.

Next year we are planning on repeating our effort at satellite broadcasts to these six rural schools. However, we feel we will be better prepared and view our first effort as a successful learning experience. We also plan on significantly changing our plan. Next year we are going to visit each of the participating schools in the fall semester and at that time videotape their role playing of critical issues they wish the program to address. We will then use their role-plays, along with videotaped role-plays performed by our college students, as an essential part of the satellite broadcasts. We will show the role-plays and comment upon them and respond to comments coming in from the six remote sites. To encourage participation by the students in the role-plays, we are going to create a contest; one with prizes for ***all*** participants so that it is a **win-win** contest. Since one of our concerns this inaugural year was parent involvement and permission for their children's' participation, we are also going to make sure that parents are more aware of what we are attempting to do to avoid any complications. Although we did not have any problems from parents, we were at times concerned that they might be upset by some of the programming and want to reach out to them to minimize any potential misunderstandings.

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Results:

The results were, in general, very positive. The feedback from the schools that fully participated was uniformly excellent. However, not all schools elected to participate. The reluctance of the non-participants was primarily due to time; they just didn't feel that they could "intrude" upon their schedules to

accommodate this comprehensive effort on our part. As this effort is on-going as we plan on future visits and future broadcasts, we hope to utilize the positive feedback from the more participatory schools to "sell" our program to the other schools. Although the effort takes substantial time and energy on our part, we came away with an appreciation on how important it is to reach out to our schools and a conviction that the investment was well worthwhile.

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